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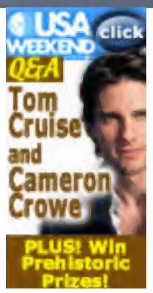

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Ridership demographics remain a question mark

By MICHAEL SCHAEFER

Staff Writer

Business or pleasure — Business riders, Above, and vacationers, below, right, enjoy the comfort of passenger train travel in these Amtrak courtesy images. The New England Rail Passenger Authority has predicted they'll have 320,000 riders the first year, but whether the majority will turn out to be intercity, day or commuter passengers remains a mystery. (Amtrak courtesy images)

The Amtrak train that begins service from Boston to Portland on Dec. 15 could mean more visitors to northern New England, according to rail officials.

"That's the healthy trunk (from Boston to Portland) and that trunk is tapping into the markets of Boston, New York and Washington, D.C," said Wayne Davis, chairman of TrainRiders Northeast.

Work to determine whether an expanded rail route from Boston to Portland was feasible began in 1989. Since then, subsequent studies have determined that potential ridership for a train exists in New England and is growing, officials said.

Many agencies, including Maine's Department of Transportation and the state's congressional delegation, were involved in reviving the passenger line. TrainRiders Northeast also played a crucial role.

The new train, named the Downeaster, is expected to have 320,000 passengers a year. The number is based on the number of tickets sold.

As of Nov. 30, more than 1,000 passengers had purchased their tickets for the Dec. 15 train. Riders purchased tickets to travel between two communities along the line's eight stops. The train can accommodate 240 riders.

About 64 percent of the riders are expected to be visitors and

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vacationers, 14 percent will be commuters and 22 percent will be others, said Nathan Moulton, development director for the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority.

For the first three years of operations, the rail authority's budget $5.3 million. If needed, rail officials may take advantage of about $2 million in federal clean air money.

Officials do not expect to have to use the extra funds.

However, Moulton said the bulk of the lines' operating expenses will be financed by ticket sales. The rail authority will set the ticket prices.

"Our bread and butter is from the tickets," he said.

Ticket prices range from $4 to $20 for one-way fares and $13 to $34 for round-trip fares. The rail authority also offers ten-trip and commuter passes.

In the beginning, rail officials have scheduled four daily round trips based on their studies. However, the ridership will be continually reviewed.

Expected make-up

Total anticipated ridership, first year: 320,000
Total tickets sold for first day (Dec. 15): 1,000
Vacationers: 64 percent
Commuters: 14 percent Unspecified: 22 percent
Source: NNEPRA

Moulton said planners have made allowances for growth. Passenger cars or additional trains trips may be added if ridership increases, he said.

After three planes were hijacked by terrorists, travelers have been looking for alternative, safe methods of transportation. Train travel is one option, Davis said.

"There's an increasing number of people for whom that's important and the events of 9/11 underscore that," he said.

Davis, who now also serves as vice president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers in Washington, D.C., said the number of people interested in riding the train has increased.

In the early 1990s, Davis traveled the country as commissioner for the National Council on Intermodal Transportation. Along with cars, buses and planes, the council also solicited residents' opinions on train travel.

Like many communities across the nation, residents in northern New England desired rail service, Davis said.

While the first studies for the Downeaster were performed 13 years ago, Davis said subsequent studies have indicated that the ridership is there and is growing.

In 1989, the group of train advocates submitted 90,000 signatures from Maine residents to the Maine Legislature. The assembly approved the introduction of rail service.

Davis said the petition asked for the public's support of rail lines, which is similar to support given to highways and airports.
Michael Schaefer can be reached at 742-4455 ext. 5394 or via e-mail at mschaefer@fosters.com